

CC2) The Gospel of Salvation

We believe and confess that all human beings are sinners, and that sinners are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God alone justifies human beings by faith in Christ—a faith which God creates through the message of the Gospel. As ambassadors for Christ, God uses us to speak his Word and build his kingdom.

Where one starts makes all the difference for where one ends. It is no accident in the Augsburg Confession that Article II on “Sin” precedes and informs the succeeding Articles on “The Son of God” (III), “Justification” (IV), and “The Office of Ministry” (V). Without some awareness of the danger from which the Gospel saves—the sickness for which the Gospel is the cure—the proclamation of salvation is unintelligible. In identifying this necessary presupposition for the coherent proclamation of the Gospel, CC2 (above) is refreshingly unoriginal. The divine prescription of the Gospel is preceded by the Biblical diagnosis that “all human beings are sinners,” recalling Pogo’s wry observation: “We have met the enemy and they is us!”

This verdict is personally unsettling and direct. To find sinners we need only glimpse ourselves in the mirror. To find sin’s dark hiding place, the infected source from which comes the wrong we do and our failure to do the good, we need look no further than our own hearts. To begin to realize the price exacted by our sin, we need look no further than what our sin cost God to redeem us: “the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” This judgment, of course, is an affront to our own self-estimate; not surprisingly we reject this starting point for the Gospel and choose one more to our liking, one that relocates or redefines the “problem.” Also unsurprisingly, this relocation or redefinition results in a gospel much different than that revealed by God’s Word.

The Biblical diagnosis of “sin” as the catastrophic infection affecting every human being—and requiring nothing less than the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of God the Son as the cure—is ever more frequently disparaged as the naive piety of an unsophisticated era. “Sin” and “sinner” are regarded as anachronisms inimical with “modern” (and “post-modern”) perceptions that the “real” problems are imperfect and unjust social-political systems and structures or judgmental and exclusive concepts that impede the individual’s search for self. Consequently the orthodox Gospel of salvation in Christ (and its Biblical presuppositions regarding “sin” and “sinners”) is excised in favor of a diverse range of “gospels” of social liberation on the one side and individual self-actualization on the other.

Similarly, Jesus, the Savior and Redeemer of two millennia of Christian faith and teaching, is replaced with Jesus the sage and exemplar of social transformation, and the guru of acceptance and inclusivity. This is quite amenable to the sensitivities of those discomfited by “blood and people hanging on crosses,” who see in Jesus’ crucifixion the deed of a divine child-abuser. Jesus’ death and resurrection, when not simply ignored as an historical or theological embarrassment, are reduced to metaphors: on the one side for the necessity of sacrifice for the cause of social justice, and on the other side, for the inward journey to self-discovery and self-affirmation. Jesus’ moral teachings, extracted and distilled from the crudities of the canonical Gospels, are then selectively edited to serve as vehicles for philosophies of social transformation and/or self-authentication.

The role of the church and Christians in the unfolding of these alternative gospels is the self-congratulatory function of serving as “change agents” against unjust social structures and systems, and repressive and exclusive ideologies (e.g. the historic Christian Church and faith), while providing a “safe” and “inclusive” place for the process of personal growth, discovery, and affirmation. “Justification” becomes the “un-sinning” of sins—except for the “sin” of questioning “change.” The “word” now spoken under the thrall of these “gospels” is a call to the “church” to “change” and “be transformed for the sake of the world,” not the proclamation of a crucified and risen Lord for the salvation of sinners.

What is at stake in all this are, first, sinners for whom Christ died and rose; no other gospel saves and justifies. Second, the church body to which we belong, the ELCA, is at risk. It is the “preaching of the Gospel in its purity” which both creates and defines the church. While the “one holy Christian church will be and remain forever” there are no such guarantees for particular institutions in which the Gospel of Salvation is diluted or replaced by a “different” gospel, no matter how “just” or “personally healing” such gospels may be. CC2’s orthodox reiteration of classical Christian teaching on salvation including the right starting point is precisely what our Church needs to hear, confess, and uphold.

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